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MY FOUR

GREAT GRANDMOTHERS

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MY FOUR GREAT GRANDMOTHERS

A SHORT time ago I heard an expert in education declare the inferiority of the women of the present day to their great-grandmothers; an inferiority he would not allow in the other sex, saying that our ancestors were trained to strength and vigor of living by the hard conditions of their lives; and that the conditions of modern life continue to call for those qualities in men, while they have largely ceased to do so in women. The context of his speech showed that he referred to the early settlers of New England and their descendants; a race even now very homogeneous.

About the same time it was alleged by another expert that the superiority of the New England great-grandmother was but a myth; that she was in a position of slavery, unrepresented politically, and down-trodden in domestic life; that she was often worn out early and died young; that, though her family may have been large, the great infant mortality kept pace with the birth-rate, "only the toughest surviving;" and that her descendant is her superior both in the discharge of domestic duties and those to society and the world

at large. In a religious newspaper there appeared not long ago a eulogy of the woman college graduate, whom the author considered as representing the highest ideal of modern womanhood, and so superior to the man of the corresponding class that it would be hardly possible for her to find a husband worthy of her, the man student "being only trained to the making of money." This used to be thought an important element in the family economics and can hardly yet be said to have lost its necessity.

Of more advanced sociologists some allege that the introduction of machinery has supplanted woman in her domestic duties, so that she has no sufficient scope at home and must take up business and politics for occupation; others affirm that she is crushed and hampered by the weary round of these same duties, and that she must throw them off before she can assume the position of superiority to which both parties agree that she is destined. Both consider the family, as at present existing, an archaic and soon to be superseded institution, and foresee relief in a future when the home is no more, when the husband and wife meet occasionally in the intervals of their several careers, when their connection may be broken and a fresh one formed at pleasure, and when the children, if there are any, are put as soon as possible after birth into the care of trained specialists to bring up for the State, while the mothers specialize in other directions. These ideas are

propounded as new, though really as old as Plato's Republic.

I do not care to argue for any theories, but simply to relate facts, having been led to wonder how much those who deal in the former know of their great-grandmothers. I know four, and their parents too.

My ancestors in New England were, I think, very fair specimens of their race. They were chiefly of English blood with some slight mixture which will be hereafter mentioned. Every immigrant came to Massachusetts except one to New Hampshire. All were here before 1700, except one who came at that date as a youth, returned, and came again with his family in 1715. They were mostly well born and well connected, with a fair, though not a remarkable share, of members distinguished in various lines—civic, military, literary and theological. They show a high degree of respectability, without any known cases on the criminal record, except one man who was fined for entertaining Quakers, and one woman who was hanged as a witch, not to forget that well-known pair of sinners in Eden who were convicted of picking their own peas on a Sabbath day. In many instances they showed honorable public spirit, undaunted patriotism, religious liberality, and warm philanthropy. They came of educated stocks who wrote letters, kept diaries, set down their recollections, and bequeathed with them the habit of preserving

them. Were it not so, I should not know so much about them. I have on record the names of 340 of my lineal ancestors in New England and many in the Fatherland, and am justly proud of them, though I doubt not that many others could if they tried show as good or better records.

Of them I would present the cases of my great-grandmothers, because they are of the generation specially alluded to in the remarks I have quoted; and thus arbitrarily chosen, no selection for any purpose can be supposed. They were all born within a space of twenty years. None were related to each other.

It is the custom to contrast our generation with previous ones in the surroundings and aspects of their lives, and to a large extent rightfully; but the family ways and family life of the early twentieth century hardly strike one as more different from those of the last half of the eighteenth than some of the families of the earlier date were from each other. Nor should this surprise us, if we but reflect a moment on the great variety in the mental and social outlook of families in our own time. In studying the thoughts and deeds of my ancestors, some appear very alien to me while others show a familiar touch which surprises me. Could I meet some, we should have to make a great effort on both sides, perhaps an unsuccessful one, to understand each other; while it really seems as if I might be at home with others in five minutes. Of none have I felt this more

strongly than of my great-grandmother Number One and her people.

Number One, Susanna Varnum, was born September 4th, 1734, at Dracut, Essex County, Massachusetts, and died November 27th, 1811, at Andover, Maine (then East Andover, Massachusetts). She was a daughter of John and Phoebe (Parker) Varnum. She was married February 15th, 1757, at Dracut, to Ebenezer Poor, son of Samuel and Deborah (Kimball) Poor, born January 16th, 1732, at North Andover, Essex County, Massachusetts, died August 27th, 1809, at Andover, Maine.

They were related to each other. They had twelve children, five sons and seven daughters, of whom two of each sex died in childhood. Three of these children died in one summer, within a few weeks, which seems to indicate that the cause was some epidemic. All the rest grew up, married, and had children, and lived to a ripe age, two over eighty years. All have descendants living, and all the sons descendants of the name. There were forty-four grandchildren.

She was born to what seems the most favored lot of any of the four, in a lovely rural home with every comfort known to those times, of parents who lived together fifty-four years, had thirteen children, and died within six months of each other. Her father was a man of large means, and one of mark far and near, leading a life which in some degree repeated that of the

English squirearchy of the time. His home was a social centre, and he was a man of large political influence, warmly interested in all public questions, on which his views were advanced for the age. His family were deeply involved in the wars of that eventful century. He fought in his youth in the Indian wars; his oldest son died in early manhood at Crown Point, in the French and Indian War; and three other sons, one an officer of distinction, fought in the Revolutionary Army, as did relations of all degrees, for his was a race with a strong military bent.

Though punctual in all religious duties, he was no bigot, and wasted no time in worrying about his own soul and those of his neighbors, though to their temporal wants he was most generous. Frequent and fond mention is made in his diary of amusements, and on New Year's Day, 1777, when he was nearly seventy-two, he treated himself and his family to the gift of a "Dubble Slay," price twenty pounds, as one might now say a "Motor-car." (Though a magistrate, and the maker-out of deeds and surveyor of lands for his whole neighborhood, he, like most of his kind in those days, indulged himself in his diary in any spelling that came handy to him). Perhaps the prettiest of many bright family pictures is that of the "Dubble Slay," flying up and down and across the Merrimack with jingling bells, carrying the patriarch and his wife and their children and grandchildren, stalwart boys and

blooming girls, on their way to dance and supper. The horses who drew it, evidently favorites, are often specified. At seventy-three he thought nothing of "jumping on a fast horse and galloping off" to rouse a posse when a free negro's liberty was threatened—he was an early and ardent anti-slavery leader—or when in spring the roads were "breaking up" of riding to "meeting" with his wife on a pillion behind him. He was a noble example of all that is best in the English character.

His daughter, Susanna, married a man who, like many of his family, had more power in forming ideals than in carrying them out, and their life had its vicissitudes. But it ended in peace with them in a pleasant homestead where their great-great-grandson still keeps their memory green. She was a gentle, quiet, fair-haired, blue-eyed woman, a devoted wife and mother, whose epitaph might have run, like the Roman matron's, —"Domum mansit—lanam fecit."

Great-grandmother Number Two, Sarah Emery, was born July 13th, 1753, at West Newbury, Essex County, Massachusetts, and died March 4th, 1847, at Andover, Maine. She was daughter of Moses and Lydia (Emery) Emery. She was married at West Newbury, June 1st, 1773, to Ezekiel Merrill, son of Roger and Mary (Hale) Merrill, born December 9th, 1747, at West Newbury, died March 16th, 1830, at Andover, Maine.

They were related, and her whole family record shows a remarkable amount of inter-marriage. They

were of English descent. They had eight children, three sons and five daughters. All grew up, married, had children, and lived to a ripe age, two over ninety. All have descendants, and all the sons have descendants of the name. There were fifty-seven grandchildren.

She was one of ten children, whose parents lived together for sixty-one years. Her condition in early life was very similar to Susanna Varnum's. She, too, was born and brought up in a beautiful home, near the same noble river. The Varnum home has vanished, but the Emery one remains to speak for itself, though gone from the family who built it and lived in it for a century and a half. "Squire Varnum" was the richer, more prominent man and his circle was wider, but Sarah, throughout her long life, was a person of much more force of character and social power than Susanna. The strong impression she made on all who knew her lingers among their posterity to this day. Her husband was a soldier of the Revolution, a winning, light hearted, insouciant being.

"A lightsome eye, a soldier's mien,
A feather of the blue,"

won her heart. After the war she accompanied him with their seven young children far into the Eastern wilderness, where their last child was born, and where they lived two years in camp without another white

person within twenty miles. She was a fine example of a pioneer wife and mother, and as such received public honors and rewards by vote of the town of which her husband was first settler, and where her descendants still keep the homestead they built. Her children grew up blooming and beautiful in the wilderness without church or school or physician. Perhaps some compensation for the latter deficiency may be found in the fact that they had no germs in reach either. They had no appendicitis or adenoid glands or astigmatic eyes to trouble them. But why they never fell from trees, or were swamped in their canoes, or frozen in snowdrifts, or burned in forest fires, or cut their arteries, or required any surgical aid beyond what a mother could give, I cannot say. They were athletes without taking any trouble or expense in training, and I have seen the last survivor, the youngest daughter but one, rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed and light-footed, at seventy-eight. The elder children had a year or two at school, and then taught the others. As soon as the rough forest track was cut out, and smoothed by the early snows, the tall figure of the father might be seen leading the horse on which sat his pretty young daughter, while her brother came after, leading the packhorse whose load of furs was to pay for the winter schooling of the two. This valuable burden was eagerly given by the neighboring Indians in pay for the soldier's continental uniform and its brass

buttons. This simple education was what the children of one who was afterwards a wealthy man, and the great man of his town, received. The boy's spirit was to show itself in three generations of descendants honorably distinguished as officers in our regular army.

This family were of the same type of religion as the Varnums. They had too much to do in this world to worry about the next, and when a church rose near them, it took, and long kept to the Arminian views of its parent in Massachusetts.

Great-grandmother Number Three, Sarah Blake, was born September 21st, 1754, at Dorchester, Norfolk County, Massachusetts, and died July 18th, 1791, at the same place. She was daughter of Samuel and Patience (White) Blake. She was married, June 9th, 1772, at Dorchester, to John Pierce, son of John and Elizabeth (Fessenden) Pierce, born September 22d, 1742, at Dorchester, died December 11th, 1833, at the same place.

They were of English descent with a slight Huguenot mixture on the wife's side. There was some intermarriage among her ancestors. He had been married before, and was married twice after, but she was the mother of all his children, of whom they had ten, four sons and six daughters, of whom all grew up, all married, and all but two—a son who married a delicate girl who only survived a few months, and a daughter who married late in life—had children. The family

of another daughter became extinct with her only grandchild. All the rest had descendants, and all the sons had descendants of the name. All lived to a ripe age, and three over ninety. There were ninety grandchildren.

Great-Grandmother Number Three was in some ways less fortunate than the others. She was one of nine children. Her father, a man of uncommon mental gifts and belonging to an intellectual and cultured family stock, died fourteen years after his marriage and she and a twin sister who died young were posthumous children. Her mother married again, and she was brought up in a stepfather's house, probably with all kindness, but in a plainer and quieter way than her predecessors on the list. But she was one to win all hearts, a beauty and a petted youngest child, the darling of her brothers and sisters. Her husband, a kind-hearted, easy-going, well-to-do but unpretentious tradesman, continued the petting, and though he prudently gave his large family two stepmothers, never forgot her; and her children almost idolized her, especially the pride of her heart, her eldest boy. In him revived the love of learning and intellectual ambition which had been marked traits in her own family, and especially so in a brother lost in the height of his early promise. To the end of his days he loved to tell how she retained her youthful bloom and grace to such a degree, that when he, a freshman of sixteen, was proudly escorting

her about the Harvard precincts, his classmates would beg for an introduction to "his pretty sister."

This family were also strongly revolutionary in principles, and inclined to liberality in religion. They went to church on Sundays and tried to do their duty on week-days, but without much worry. While even the emigrants had varied in their religious views, the growth of wealth, and intercourse with the rest of the world had by this time led to an easy tolerance in the elder and especially the seaport towns, and the "established order" in which the "Great Awakening" had not yet led to a split, covered, as the French Protestant Church does now, wide differences.

Great-grandmother Number Four, Sarah Homes, was born on January 2d, 1748, at Boston, Massachusetts, and died on March 26th, 1826, at Northampton, Hampshire County, Massachusetts. She was daughter of William and Rebecca (Dawes) Homes. She was married October 22d, 1770, at Boston, to Benjamin Tappan, son of Benjamin and Elizabeth (Marsh) Tappan, born October 21st, 1747, at Manchester, Essex County, Massachusetts, died January 29th, 1831, at Northampton. He was of pure English descent. Her mother was of English descent, and her father of Scottish-Irish descent on his father's side, English on his mother's. They had eleven children, seven sons and four daughters. One of the sons died in infancy. The rest of the children all grew up, married, and

had children. One lived to be over ninety, and the rest to a ripe age, except one daughter. All but one have descendants and five of the sons descendants of the name. There were seventy-two grandchildren.

This was the most mixed stock of the four, and also the most restless, many of its lines settling first on the islands, Nantucket and Martha's Vineyard, before seeking the wider range of the mainland; and Sarah's husband struck inland and settled on the Connecticut River. She was one of fifteen children, and her parents lived together forty-five years. The character of her race was strongly marked—that which the popular belief of the present day assigns to the typical Puritan. Although brought up in Boston, and the daughter of a wealthy man, of note in Revolutionary history and prominent in civic and military colonial service, she grew up in much narrower lines than the others I have portrayed, and with much fewer "worldly pleasures." Her father, a nephew of Benjamin Franklin, was a fine specimen of public spirit and uncompromising rectitude, but was also a pattern of the severest religious strictness. According to the family memoirs "he found it his hardest task to struggle, through his long life, with his sense of humor," one of the most marked traits of his illustrious uncle, which the unfortunate nephew kept down till in his children it seemed to perish with atrophy. In his daughter Sarah, the union of English Calvinism and Scotch Presbyterianism, trans-

planted to the bleak Connecticut River atmosphere, culminated in a theology by whose "blueness" indigo shows pale. She was a distinguished local saint, and with many virtues she possessed the defects of the character; though, be it said, she had enough of human nature not to rejoice in the certain doom of many of her posterity, but made herself as unhappy about it as she made them. Her husband, though a descendant of Michael Wigglesworth, the celebrated divine who sounded the early New England lyre in unsparing denunciation of the non-elect, was by some cross streak of blood, aided by the moderating influences of a successful business career, a wide-minded, kindly man, who entered the revolutionary army out of patriotism, with but little taste for the field. He could not have damned a fly, and usually found it wise to hold his peace. "Your grandchildren," he once remarked on one of the rare occasions of speaking his mind,"will not love you, if you are so severe with them." "And what does that matter," she asked with a fine disdain, "if I can only do them good?" She never wasted any concern on her six lively boys when they were out of her sight, regarding Providence as then taking them in hand, though when in her presence the responsibility devolved upon her; and, born with a spirit as fearless as her own, they responded to her training without loss of affection. They grew up successful men and several were marked figures in public life.

On the whole, I find most touches of sympathy with her in her unregenerated girlhood, whose giddiness and folly she was wont to deplore, and fancy likes to picture the unconverted child, as, hurrying home one evening to the old North End house later than she should have been out, she was accosted by a young officer from the Fort with "May I see you home, my pretty maid?" "Certainly, Sir," she replied, and they strolled on together, the young lady cheerfully sustaining the conversation while her companion replied more and more doubtfully. His awkwardness increased at the sight of the house at whose door she stopped, and when she still ushered him on to the sitting-room, and the tall, gentlemanly master rose with a look of polite inquiry, which she met with "Father! this gentleman was kind enough to offer to see me home!" the unfortunate intruder turned and incontinently bolted.

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There are certain traits in which all these women may be classed together in contrast with prevalent modern practices, perhaps with modern ideals. Each and all, they nourished their children from their own breasts, now so exceptional a habit. Each and all thoroughly understood what were then thought a woman's chief duties, and practised them with unfailing devotion. They were true and loyal wives, careful and devoted mothers, looking well to the ways of their households and successfully training their daughters in the same ways. They could hardly have understood

the ideas of the "new woman." The childless wife, or the wife with only one child, would have seemed to them an object of pity, not of envy. Free divorce, with temporary connections resulting, would have seemed to them simply disgusting. Such tendencies were in a world out of their ken. They were emphatically queens of home and helpmates in every sense of the word.

Is it probable, that one hundred and fifty years hence, any one of our race will be able to trace his descent, in like degree, from four such women as these? A more pertinent question is, will any of the race be left to trace descent from anybody?

In the year 1798, Thomas Robert Malthus published the first edition of his "Essay on the Principles of Population," in which he alarmed the world by his demonstration that population if unchecked tended to increase faster than the means of subsistence. He reckoned—and the estimate was a moderate one—that under such a condition, it would double itself in every twenty-five years, thus growing in geometrical ratio, with which no improvement in developing the resources of the soil could possibly keep pace. He advocated protective checks, rather than waiting for the inevitable ones of disease, famine and war; and his single precept was, "Do not marry till you have a fair prospect of being able to support a family."

Malthus's teaching produced some direct effect in the improvement of the English poor-laws, and those of some other countries; how far their indirect effect extended it is impossible to say; it probably coincided with other causes to give rise to changes he could not have foreseen. About the middle of the nineteenth century the birthrate of the most civilized nations declined with surprising suddenness. First marked in France, the movement began, according to the late Carroll Wright, at about 1847 in the United States; according to the Whethams (William Cecil Dampier and Catherine Durning), at about 1871 in Great Britain, showing itself first and most among the well-to-do and thrifty classes—the very ones from which the descent of a nation is most to be desired. But these soon found that if they took Malthus's advice, it only led to their being taxed to support the children of others less provident.

The probable or possible causes need not be here discussed. It is enough to point out that the alarm point has shifted, and most of all in this country. I will illustrate by one example. My father had eighty-three first cousins, and my mother one hundred and forty-one. How many first cousins has any of my readers? How many have none? This latter case would in my parents' days have been accounted a melancholy prodigy. I had fifty-seven first cousins. My parents had seven children and eleven grand-

children. They have up to date nine great-grandchildren. They had at least more grandchildren than children, now not so common a thing, should we examine a large number of families of their class—say the graduates of Harvard College for the last fifty years. Their ancestral stock on all sides was a vigorous one and still shows it in some degree.

The decline of birth rate exists of course in this country as a whole, though in varying proportions. I have spoken of the New England colonial race because I possess more statistics thereof, and because the contrast is more marked from the fact that during the whole eighteenth century it gained little from immigration, to which the growth of this section is now chiefly due. But in spite of the exultation sometimes openly expressed by the immigrants in the prospect of supremacy to be attained by their superior numbers, they show a similar weakening after a generation or two on American soil. Meanwhile, with improved medical skill and greater sanitary precautions, the term of human life is lengthening, so that the younger and stronger part of the community may yet find the support of the older and feebler an increasing burden.

Yet as the predictions of Malthus, though based on calculations without a flaw, have been disproved by actual occurrences, so may those of our present investigators be. The unforeseen currents of life have again and again deceived all expectations. It is the

opinion of the Whethams and Grant Allen, foremost among students in this field, that, other things being equal, the number of four children to every fertile marriage would suffice to keep the population at a level, and that the number of six would insure a very slight increase, which might be sufficient could peaceful relations among the nations keep each from regarding with terror the growth of her neighbors' fighting strength, and could increase be checked among the classes unfit for parentage. It is for the race to watch the shifting of the wind, and spread its sails to catch the favoring breeze.

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